

From Leisurely Posts to Urgent Tweets: what can we learn from using social media in an emergency.

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Introduction

During the bushfire emergency in October 2013 in NSW, the Blue Mountains community was at risk and access to timely and accurate information was crucial. Emergency services and various media outlets reported on the crisis extensively via their social media platforms. The Blue Mountains City Library, using its established social media platforms, joined in the conversation.

The experience brought to light some points about the nature of social media and its relationship to public libraries:

- Public libraries are well positioned to become a trusted social media information node, in any situation;
- There is plenty of practical information on social media sites: librarians as information specialists can sift through the data and convert it into useful information for their communities.
- Communication via social media can foster community connectedness and public libraries are well positioned to facilitate and contribute to online conversations.

The nature of social media (fast, potentially reaching many, connecting people) makes it a valuable tool to inform and build relationships in an emergency. Over the last few years, the importance of social media in providing access to essential information in disasters has been demonstrated (for example the January 2011 floods in Queensland and the February 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand).

Disasters can bring to the fore elements of society previously obscured (Murthy 2013). Drawing from the use of social media in emergency settings, this paper explores elements of social media made apparent by its uses in emergencies and how social media tools can help public libraries support their communities whether in a crisis or not.

Blue Mountains City Library social media

The Blue Mountains City Library has been using social networking and photo-sharing sites and blogs to share information and engage with its community. The library Facebook page¹ and Twitter account² are primarily used to promote library services and activities and share interesting posts from others, with the hope that this may lead to engagement with the community. The photo sharing site Flickr³ is used to facilitate access to images from our Local Studies collection as well as to gather information from the community about these images. Conversations are encouraged on all platforms, however community engagement is principally noticeable in the user added content to the Local Studies image collection. The information communicated on all platforms is either created in-house (i.e. information about library activities, events and resources) or sourced from other social media users and shared. Other active Blue Mountains Library social media accounts are not discussed in this paper⁴.

The function of Facebook and Twitter for the Blue Mountains Library has been, as it is assumed to be for other public libraries, to serve as an electronic noticeboard. The focus for the social media team at the Blue Mountains Library has been primordially on Facebook

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/BlueMountainsCityLibrary>

² <https://twitter.com/BMCLibrary>

³ https://www.flickr.com/photos/blue_mountains_library_-_local_studies/

⁴ For the full list of our current social media accounts, see the appendix (and like, follow and join us!)

rather than Twitter. The accounts have been linked to enable Facebook posts to be automatically forwarded on Twitter. This Facebook focus is probably due to a lack practical experience with Twitter from the team and therefore a lack of insights into its workings and potential uses to the library.

Emergency and social media

When the bushfires crisis began on the 13th of October 2013, emergency services and various media outlets reported on the crisis extensively via their social media platforms. The Blue Mountains City Library, using its established social media, joined in the conversation. Elements of information cycle were in essence the same as usual. Information was created and posted. Information was gathered and shared. The timing of the information cycle was however considerably faster. Twitter proved to be particularly useful in gathering information in a timely relevant manner. One particular insight from using Twitter in this emergency was that there is useful, practical, and in a crisis situation, even live-saving information on Twitter.

During the bushfires crisis in the Blue Mountains, emergency services (i.e. NSW Rural Fire Services) and media outlets, national (ABC TV and Radio) and local (The Blue Mountains Gazette) used social media extensively to cover the bushfires. The Blue Mountains community also joined in, as well as people interstates and overseas. And so did the library. Each social media account served the purpose to amplify the emergency and recovery messages and therefore increased their reach. This created a vibrant and intense online community, unified in its focus.

Desperately Searching Twitter

On Twitter, information can range from the banal to the profound, from lifestyle updates to disaster response. The varied nature of the content makes the Twitter search and classifying features worth investigating.

In the Twitter advanced search, there are options to search by words (and hashtags), people, places, dates and moods and any combination of these. Searches can be saved and are fluid (they will keep updating). The Twitter “discover” support page provide useful tips and information on how to get the most out of a Twitter search¹.

In order to understand how the information is organised and how it can be retrieved on Twitter, we need to consider the hashtag and its functions. Placing the pound or hash sign (#) in front of relevant keyword or phrase (text – with numbers or not, no space or punctuation) turns the string into a searchable link called a hashtag. Hashtags started as a way to link conversations on Twitter and are now also used on other social media sites such as Pinterest², Tumblr³, Instagram⁴ and Facebook.

Within few days of the NSW October 2013 bushfires starting, some hashtags predominated: #nswrfs; #nswfires; #nswfire; #BlueMountains; #Lithgow; #Springwood; #Winmalee; #firefighters. Of these #nswrfs and #nswfires in particular prevailed. These tags were used to link conversations about the NSW bushfires and the NSW RFS response..

Any tweet broadcast from the NSW Fires Twitter account (@NSWRFS⁵) can be accessed by opening the NSW RFS Twitter page⁶ in a web browser. There is no need to have a Twitter

¹ <https://support.twitter.com/groups/53-discover>

² pinterest.com

³ tumblr.com

⁴ instagram.com

⁵ When a username is preceded by the @ sign, it becomes a link to their Twitter profile.

⁶ <https://twitter.com/nswrfs>

account. Listening to the RFS Twitter feed enabled the Blue Mountains City Library to directly access the RFS messages at the time of broadcast. Important information about the progress of the fires and the deployment of firefighting teams, notifications of community meetings, and announcements of Commissioner Briefings (that the technology allowed us to watch these in real time) was then reposted and/or retweeted via the library Facebook and Twitter page.

Alternatively typing #nswfires in a Twitter search provided access to all conversations using this hashtag. From this stream, we were able to gather a wide range of information that depending on content were interpreted and shared immediately or kept aside for potential use at a later time. Listening to the #nswfires conversation stream gave an indication of the impact of the situation on the community and beyond. Messages of support, offers of help appeared and were selectively re-broadcast. The community quickly bonded and varying business, organisations and individuals made their initiatives known on social media. As the messages spread and amplified online, a sense of belonging to a proactive supportive community emerged. Government bodies, NGOs and media outlets also posted using the #nswfires tag thus engendering information on a broad range of topics.

Public libraries are well placed to assess information from various fields. With their position as local government organisations, they have direct access to the official local message. As information specialists, libraries are well-connected to other information agencies of government or non-government nature (i.e. Find Legal Answers, Legal Aid, and Department of Human Services). As local community organisations, public libraries have ties and partnerships with other local community organisations (i.e. Neighbourhood Centres). This hybrid of government, community and information positions public libraries well to assess and distribute locally relevant and wide-ranging messages to their community.

As it is not necessary to have a Twitter account to harvest information from Twitter, the actual reach of the medium is larger than its membership. Hashtags function as subject headings. Like subject headings, they facilitate information retrieval and link related records. Unlike subject headings, hashtags are not standardised. They grow organically. However, there are also conventions and “official” hashtags. Hashtags can be overused and thus making them useless. On the other hand, useful information may not be retrieved if they are omitted. Hashtags will have an impact on search results and thus needs to be considered within this context¹.

The Queensland Police Service (QPS) Media Unit began a trial of social media tools in 2010 with the aim to have a social media presence, engage in two-way communication with other organisations and the public, and to develop a community of online followers before disasters happen (QPS 2011). During the 2011 Queensland floods, these tools were put to the test and with much success. The hashtag #qldfloods quickly served the purpose to coordinate information. Tweets by the QPS Media Unit, the ABC News and the Courier Mail were widely retweeted (Bruns et al. 2012). Rumours may spread like wild fires on social media, but so will disclaimers. The QPS successfully quashed misreporting and rumours by using the #Mythbuster hashtag (QPS 2011). Twitter users in crisis situation become amplifiers of emergency information. Social media can have an active role in increasing the reach of critical information. In an emergency situation, the more information nodes are actively involved in the conversation the better.

Hashtags can be placed anywhere in a tweet. Conversations, content and updates with hashtags become more visible to others. Hashtags can be used for research particular

¹ For tips on making and using hashtags, see <http://www.hashtags.org/platforms/twitter/why-use-hashtags-guide-to-the-micro-blogging-universe/> . And for novices, the Welcome to Twitter section is useful: https://support.twitter.com/groups/50-welcome-to-twitter#topic_203

topics, to facilitate and contribute to discussions, to promote events, to join communities and to distribute breaking news or emergency information. They can be a powerful tool to retrieve information on social media. Their use is worth considering in social media strategies.

Building connectedness and community resilience

There has been a shift recently in the nature of community engagement in emergency services. The concept of “community development” well-known to the social and community sector is making inroad in emergency management (Australian Attorney-General’s Department, 2013). The Council of Australian Governments (2011) has developed a National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (NSDR). The document states that “[d]isaster resilience is the collective responsibility of all sectors of society, including all levels of government, business, the non-government sector and individuals” (p.IV).

Local Government is the form of government closest to the community. Within the local government structure, the library is a local government institution embedded within the community. Local Government New South Wales acknowledges that “[p]eople love local public libraries. They are centres for learning, literature, heritage and cultural activities critical to the development of well-informed vibrant communities”¹.

Public libraries sustain their communities by providing universal free access to information, knowledge and ideas, by promoting life-long learning, by offering a safe community space and by building safer, stronger, connected communities (ALIA, 2010). With their focus on “safety, harmony, equity and education” (Library Council of New South Wales, 2008, p. 65), public libraries are well positioned to support the goal of building resilience in their community. Libraries can do more than enhance and promote the community engagement endeavours of their local council and other government bodies. They can play an active role in building connection in their communities and thus build community resilience.

Social media as a tool to build community resilience and connectedness

Social media offers a significant tool in fostering connectedness and resilience. Community resilience is the ability of a community to recover from adversity. It is described as an ongoing process involving, amongst other concepts, information, communication, social connectedness and social capital (Plough et al. 2013). The ability of providing timely public safety information and of promoting connectedness makes social media particularly relevant to building community resilience (Taylor et al. 2012).

During the bushfires emergency in the Blue Mountains in October 2013, the community turned to Facebook to connect with others throughout the community, the nation and the world. Facebook groups were created coordinating offers of help and contributing to sense of shared experience. The library promoted the existence of relevant groups to its followers.

During the 2011 Queensland floods, a number of community led pages were created (Taylor et al. 2012). One page in particular “Cyclone Yasi Update”² was widely used and the subject of a study by Taylor et al. (2012). They found that there is strong evidence that social media can assist in the delivery of psychological first aid³ and support community resilience by delivering relevant and timely information and providing a forum. Their analysis of the data

¹<http://www.lgnsw.org.au/policy/libraries> Accessed 24 July 2014

²<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Cyclone-Yasi-Update>

³ For more information on psychological first aid, see <http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/Red-Cross-Psychological-First-Aid-Book.pdf>

shows that people turned to the Facebook group for information (seeking and giving) and that the interaction made people feel connected, useful and supported.

During and in the aftermath of the 22 February 2011 Christchurch earthquake, individuals and organisations turned to Twitter and Facebook in masse. The New Zealand National Business Review reports on the 23rd February that “[s]ocial media coverage surrounding the Christchurch earthquake has snowballed”. Social media was used effectively to inform people around the world of the local situation and to located missing persons (Walls 2011). Social media also played an important role in cultivating connectedness. With many community halls and churches destroyed, the community turned to social media for support and it is argued that social media fulfilled the churches pastoral care role (Mathewson 2012).

Social capital, social media and libraries

There is evidence that there is a strong link between connected communities and community resilience and in particular the significance of the role of social capital (Duffy 2013). Social capital has been defined as by the OECD (2007) as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (p. 103). Solomon (2013) looks at social capital in the context of libraries and argues that social capital is what allows an organisation to make requests from its members. Having social capital she argues is linked to having credibility. Social capital (and trust) is earned over time and in social networks it involves participating appropriately in the online community.

The public trust their libraries and the information they can access via the library staff and collections, web site and catalogue. Lankes (2011) argues that the greatest asset (and responsibility) of librarians is their credibility. As part of our professional development, he adds, we have learned to look at multiple sources and perspectives and this makes us reliable and credible, authorities rather than authoritarians. “We gain trust by consistently giving members a variety of sources and perspectives” (p.92). Knowledge, Lankes continues, is created through conversation and it is essential that librarians have a voice and take an active part in conversation.

This correlates nicely with Solomon (2013) who suggests a combination of social media conversation actions to build the library reputation and credibility, and thus increase its social capital:

- Thank your patrons
- Ask for opinions
- Offer links and other sites of interest
- Retweet your follower (if using Twitter)
- Always give credit
- Encourage feedback
- Provide information people care about: in promotional posts, answer the question “what’s in it for me?” for your followers
- Monitor and respond to posts

Towards a dynamic social media strategy

During the Victorian Black Saturday bushfires (7 February 2009), a staff at the ABC effectively used Twitter and this paved the way for the ABC to deploy social media within their work practices as Australia’s official emergency broadcaster. Their new social media strategy was tested during the 2011 Queensland floods and has been continuously assessed and reviewed since. Due to the participatory nature of social media, the ABC not only disseminates official emergency information but listens to, engages with and broadcasts

crowd-sourced information (Posetti, 2012). The ABC Emergency website¹ brings into one place the nation’s warnings and emergency coverage. The associated social media to this comprehensive website started in 2008 from a proactive ABC staff member with a Twitter account. This was followed by a strategic approach to deploying the new media within everyday work practices.

Creating a dynamic social media presence requires moving beyond an ad hoc approach towards a strategic method. In their analysis of social media use in risk and crisis communication, Wendling, Radisch and Jacobzone (2013) suggest a three pronged approach to create a social media strategy for risk and crisis communication: Bottom up, Top-down and Two-way communication. These methods work in combination and can easily be translated to the public library world: listen, inform and engage. Wendling et al. have devised checklists designed to help emergency services develop flexible communication strategies. These checklists have been adapted here to suit the public library setting².

Listen (bottom up approach)

Listen is about information gathering, sifting and evaluating. It is about situational awareness or knowing what is happening in our communities.

Table 1: Listen check list

	Yes	No
Do you have a list of blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts of local people and organisations who could help you gather information from the communities? Do you follow specific hashtags?		
Does your organisation regularly monitor social media for situational awareness (knowing what is going on around you)? (Every hour? Day? Week?)		
Do you use metrics to monitor the number of visits on local organisations Web pages, social media pages so as to grasp a trend towards one particular focus?		
Do you build methodology or tools to monitor the flow of information exchanged via social media on the internet?		
Do you encourage your community to communicate using social media (twitter, blog)?		
Do you train your staff to the use of social media as situational awareness tool?		
Does your organisation have the necessary human skills to use social media to conduct situational awareness?		

¹<http://www.abc.net.au/news/emergency/>

² The original checklists are available online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3v01fskp9s-en>.

Inform (top down approach)

This is about the created or curated content posted on social media platforms. It is about providing our listeners with content that it relevant to their lives and it is about expanding the reach of the information we broadcast.

Table 2: Inform check list

	Yes	No
Does your library have guidelines on the use of social media for the social media team? For the rest of the team?		
Does your library have a RSS system on its webpage for people to follow it?		
Does your library have a twitter account?		
Does your library have a Facebook page?		
Does your library have a blog?		
Does your library have hidden webpages/twitter/Facebook page prepared to be launched in case of crises or other occasion?		
Does the head of your library (or council) have a twitter account? A Facebook page? A blog?		
Does your library use social media to redirect people to its official website?		
Does your library use a variety of format (pictures, videos, etc.) to communicate on social media?		
Does your library regularly update its posts?		
Does your library regularly archive its social media messages?		
Does your library have a team dedicated to your social media communication?		
Does your library outsource its social media communication?		
Does your library have a fast track clearance approval process in place for social media strategy in times of crisis?		
Does your library have a list of your followers on the web and their profiles? Are you trying to build a subscriber base to extend your outreach via social media? Do you know who the key influencers are?		
Do you publicise your social media presence in press releases and place link towards your social media pages on your website?		
Do you have a strategy so that your social media network can grow? Which are your objectives in terms of growth in scope (Increase the age/ ethnicity/ gender/ geographical range of Facebook fans, twitter followers, etc.)?		
Does your library have tried to use a social media to raise risk (or other) awareness, sending tips of the week or planning a campaign on YouTube?		
Does your library monitor in real time the evolution of its social media communication and its audience profile?		
Does your library discriminate its communication according to the different social media format (Facebook, twitter, etc.)?		
Does your library share other services contents on its own pages?		

Interact (two-way approach)

This is about fostering community connectedness by participating and facilitating conversations on social networks.

Table 3: Interact check list

	Yes	No
Can your library receive and react to public input via social media?		
Is there a Question and Answer page on the library website? Is it regularly updated?		
Do you have a forum where you can exchange in real time with the community?		
Do you retweet your followers?		
Do you “like” and comment on others pages?		
Do you initiate online conversation and exchange with your audience through social media?		
Do you encourage feedback provision on your social media communication?		
Does your library participate on others’ social media to encourage exchanges? Does your library join in relevant online conversation?		
Do you implement online interactive communications (interactive games, etc.)?		
Do you integrate the different social media platforms you use with each other?		
Do you have partnerships for sharing methods of two ways communication (with private sectors, etc.)?		

Keeping stories

There has been a history of fires in the Blue Mountains and this topic is popular in Local Studies research locally, nationally and internationally. While the Blue Mountains community is still in recovery mode from the bushfires of October 2013, this latest emergency has joined past Blue Mountains fires and is now part of our local history. The Local Studies department of the Blue Mountains Library has an active presence on the photo-sharing site Flickr¹. Within few days of the October 2013 bushfires starting, a library initiated Blue Mountains Bushfires Flickr group² was created specifically to collect and showcase photos documenting the tragedy. The community was invited via social media to add their photos to the site. At time of writing, the group had 26 members and 208 photos.

The fluid nature of social media poses problems when wanting to apply a static archival quality to it. “Because, [...], social media data is often hosted remotely, is dynamic and collaborative by nature, can include several data types, and is meant to be accessed through unique interfaces, preservation and collection protocols and standards that have evolved for other [electronically stored information] are often a poor fit”. (The Sedona Conference, 2012, p.37)

NSW State Records (2014) published “Strategies for managing social media information”, a document that gives NSW government agencies some guidelines and strategies for managing their social media information.

¹https://www.flickr.com/photos/blue_mountains_library_-_local_studies/

²https://www.flickr.com/groups/blue_mountains_bushfires/

Within the context of ever increasing of government information being located in social systems, they recommend to only manage the social media information relevant to our organisation needs. In order to do so, our social media information strategies must be planned, proactive and adapted to meet fluctuating circumstances. Our information management strategies will also depend on the nature of the message: broadcasting, conversing, consulting, explaining, monitoring.

NSW State Records offers 8 strategies for the management of social media records:

Strategy 1: Leave the information where it is strategy

Strategy 2: Low level information management strategy

Strategy 3: Monitoring-based information management strategy

Strategy 4: Needs-based information management strategy

Strategy 5: Reporting as an information management strategy

Strategy 6: Information for reuse strategy

Strategy 7: Information management for accountability strategy

Strategy 8: Information management through broadcast systems strategy

Under the headings of “What this means”, “Why would I choose this?”, “What are the risks of this approach from an information management perspective?”, and “What tools can be used to do this?”¹, explanations and examples are provided for each strategy.

In a public library setting, we may choose strategy 1 “Leave the information where it is” for our Facebook posts and tweets about story time. As much as we value our story time sessions, we do not require long terms ongoing access to this information.

We may want to use Strategy 3 “Monitoring-based information management strategy” to capture the engagement of the conversations created on our sites. We can use dashboard, analytic and reporting tools for this purpose.

Local Studies departments keep locally relevant records. They also present local history in the form of stories. Many of these stories are presented online, such as presenting photos in albums on Flickr or telling a story with links and images on a Local Studies blog². It is argued that librarians are curators, connectors and (digital) story tellers (Franks 2013). Social media produces plenty of records and when these are significant to the locality (such as bushfires), the task of organising them into stories can be daunting and time-consuming. Online tools such Storify³ may help. They have been used by libraries and media outlets to curate stories created on social media. The ABC is active on Storify⁴. One of their stories is about the October 2013 NSW bushfires⁵. The Blue Mountains City Library is currently experimenting with this tool⁶. However, the sustainability of this tool for archival purpose are uncertain.

There doesn't seem to be a unified approach to these issues in the record and library field at present. While there has some prompting for the National Library of Australia “to assume leadership in developing processes for the long-term archival of social media data of national significance to take leadership” (Bruns et al. 2012, p.10), archival of social media material for local studies purposes seems unclear and ad hoc at this stage.

¹There are also tables of pros and cons for the suggested tools: <http://bit.ly/1pKoBVX>

² For some Blue Mountains Local Studies stories, see this blog:

<http://bmlocalstudies.blogspot.com.au/>.

³ <https://storify.com/>

⁴ <https://storify.com/abcnews>

⁵ <https://storify.com/abcnews/scenes-from-nsw-bushfires>

⁶ <https://storify.com/BMCLibrary>

Conclusion

Disasters makes evident elements of social life that may have been previously hidden (Murthy, 2013) and an analysis of social media used as a crisis communication tool can provide some insights into its workings. Social media has a dual purpose of informing and connecting. Disasters situations can have a bounding effect of the communities they affect. Social media is the interaction of information (provision and retrieval) and social connection. As such, social media links up nicely with the brief of public libraries to inform and connect. Public library social media can be used not only to inform audiences of library activities and services, but can also provide libraries with tools to embed themselves further within their region and deepen their understanding of local needs. It can offer another place to harvest, disseminate and archive locally significant information and stories thus contributing to positive experiences and participation in community life.

Appendix

The Blue Mountains City Library Social Media suite

Blogs:

- Blue Mountains Library Staff Connection blog: <http://bluemtslibstaff.wordpress.com/>
(not promoted to the public)
- Local Studies Blog: <http://bmlocalstudies.blogspot.com.au/>
- Readers in the Mist blog: <http://readersinthemist.wordpress.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/BlueMountainsCityLibrary>

Flickr: https://www.flickr.com/photos/blue_mountains_library_-_local_studies/

GoodReads: www.goodreads.com/BlueMountainsLibrary

Pinterest: <http://www.pinterest.com/BlueMtnsLibrary/> (for young adults)

Podcast: <http://listenersinthemist.podbean.com/>

Storify: <https://storify.com/BMCLibrary>

Tumblr: <http://bluemountainslibraryya.tumblr.com/> (for young adults)

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/BMCLibrary> @BMCLibrary

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Bookcasesinthemist>

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